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Third Space and Everyday Online Political Talk: Deliberation, Polarisation, Avoidance

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In Session Submission: Social Media, Political Participation, and Engagement

Presenters/Authors:

Scott Wright (University of Melbourne)

Todd Graham (U of Leeds)

Daniel Jackson (Bournemouth U)

Abstract:

This paper takes forward a new agenda for online deliberation - the study of everyday political talk in 'non-political' online 'third spaces' - online communities devoted to issues such as parenting, food or sports (author 2012a, b). Online deliberation research has identified a series of problems with online debate: it often polarises with like-minded people talking to each other; disagreement and/or difficult topics are avoided; and it lacks deliberative characteristics and is plagued by trolling, flaming and curbing. This paper hypothesises that political talk in third spaces will avoid these limitations. It empirically analyses the nature of debate about the 2016 Australian federal election, in a discussion forum devoted to parenting. It finds that debates are broadly rational, with limited negative discursive behaviours. While participants lean to the left, there is significant crosscutting political talk and disagreement and debates focus on 'sensitive' topics such as immigration and marriage equality.

Third Space and Everyday Online Political Talk: Deliberation, Polarisation, Avoidance

Introduction

Everyday political talk is the foundation stone of the public sphere (Habermas 1974: 49) and a “fundamental underpinning of deliberative democracy” because “through everyday political talk, citizens construct their identities, achieve mutual understanding, produce public reason, form considered opinions, and produce rules and resources for deliberative democracy.” (Kim and Kim 2008: 51) Political talk is, quite simply, crucial to the healthy functioning of democracy and citizenship (Dahlgren 2006: 282) because it facilitates political knowledge, engagement and opinion change (Price and Cappella, 2002; Huckfeldt et al. 2004) and can lead people to take or call for political actions (Author B et al 2016). Political talk can do this because it encourages shared perspective building or complementary agency: intersubjective processes whereby people link their personal ideas, issues, and actions with one another, cultivating political agency, solidarity and community (McAfee 2000: 134). The potential for everyday political talk to positively influence public opinion formation, civic/community identity and political participation has led many people to posit it as an answer to the *apparent* democratic malaise afflicting many Western democracies.

While everyday political talk and participation is normatively desirable for many, achieving it in practice is difficult (Putnam 2000; Eliasoph 1998). It is thought that the Internet might facilitate such talk and action because it has: “redefined the practices and character of political engagement” and made “it easier for the political to emerge...” by creating greater opportunities for talk from the bottom up (Dahlgren 2015: 29). However, a number of important criticisms of online political debate have been identified. First, online political debate polarises (Smith et al. 2014). This is problematic because “the benefits of deliberation depend on disagreement, which is defined in terms of interaction among citizens who hold divergent viewpoints and perspectives regarding politics” (Huckfeldt et al 2004: 11; Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004). Second, people avoid talking about politics or talk in ‘safe’ places on ‘safe’ subjects where others hold similar views, undermining deliberation (Eliasoph, 1998; Conover & Searing 2005; Mutz 2006). Third, studies of online deliberation typically identify a small minority of people that ‘dominate’ debates (e.g. Kies 2010). Deliberation requires an equal opportunity to participate (Dahlberg 2001). Active minorities might crowd out/silence other participants or sets the topic/terms of debate. Fourth, studies of political debate in online political forums often find limited evidence of deliberation, with debate descending into aggressive “flame wars”, trolling, and people talking at each other rather than listening and debating (e.g. Davis 1999, Wilhelm 2000)

This paper takes forward a new agenda for online deliberation: the study of everyday political talk in non-political online, ‘third spaces’ (author 2012a, b). The paper empirically analyses the discursive nature of everyday online political talk about the 2016 Australian federal election in one such third space: an Australian discussion forum devoted to parenting. The paper addresses four research questions:

1. To what extent do people engage in rational-critical debate?

2. To what extent do people engage in crosscutting (left-right) or polarised political talk?
3. To what extent do debates involve disagreement, and do people talk about sensitive topics?
4. How do people talk about the process of voting, and do people offer support and advice on the process of voting?

As will be explained in more detail below, the paper hypothesises that everyday political talk in third spaces has the potential to overcome some of the key criticisms of online political debate, and will be of a high discursive quality:

- H1. Political talk in third spaces will be rational, critical and discursive
- H2. Political talk in third spaces will be civil, with limited flaming, trolling and curbing
- H3. Political talk in third spaces will be crosscutting, with people from the left talking to the right
- H4. People will discuss sensitive political topics such as immigration and asylum and climate change
- H5. Super-participants will play a positive role in shaping debates

First, the paper outlines the concept and key characteristics of “third space”. Second, the paper outlines the argument as to why everyday online third spaces might mitigate some of the problems associated with political debate online. Finally, the paper presents a detailed empirical analysis of nearly 700 comments posted in three threads that focus directly on the election. This is combined with an over-arching analysis of all participants.

The Third Space

At its most basic, a third space is an online public space that exists beyond home (first space) or work (second space) where people can come together for informal conversation and socialising. The concept of third space is built on a critique of Ray Oldenburg’s concept of third place. As the name suggests, third places are *place based* spaces; the common denominator is the location of the participants and that community can thrive: “The third place is a generic designation for a great variety of public spaces that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals’ and is a core setting of informal public life” (1999: 16) including pubs and cafes and community hangouts. Oldenburg argues that third places perform a crucial role in the development of societies and communities, helping to strengthen citizenship and thus are “central to the political processes of a democracy” (1999: 67). While important, Oldenburg believes that third places are declining (and often wholly absent) in America. In part, Oldenburg (1999: 77) blames television and the Internet: he dismisses virtual community and the network society as a “myth” arguing “the new, corporately-controlled technological order has so atomised the citizenry that the term ‘society’ may no longer be appropriate.”

While Oldenburg was highly critical of the internet, scholars such as Rheingold (2003), Schuler (1996), Bruckman and Resnick (1995), and Wellman (1998) have suggested that online communities might be akin to, or are, a kind of third place. As Rheingold (2003: 10) notes: “It might not be the same kind of place that Oldenburg had in mind, but so many of his descriptions of third places could also describe the

WELL [online community]. Perhaps cyberspace is one of the informal public places where people can rebuild the aspects of community that were lost when the malt shop became a mall.” Oldenburg identifies a series of participatory and environmental characteristics that must feature for a third place to exist. This includes a group of regulars who help to set a light-hearted tone to the debate.

The concept of third space re-theorises key aspects of Oldenburg’s participatory and structural characteristics (Author 2012a, b; Author et al., 2016). First, and arguably the most important difference, is that third spaces *do not* privilege place-based forums over issue (or other) based communities. Second, rather than using the idea of regulars, we use the concept and typology of super-participants. Authors (2014) identify three types of super-participant: super-posters (SP1s) who create a lot of content (at least 2000 posts); agenda-setters (SP2s) who seed new threads; and moderators and facilitators (SP3s) who manage the debate and are broadly equivalent to a landlady or landlord. Super-participants help to set the tone and topic of debate, and provide a kind of glue that holds virtual space together. Third, Oldenburg argues that cutting edge humour – the kind that would be offensive in other social contexts – enhances bonding in third places and is thus a positive environmental characteristic. The greater fluidity and (often) weaker social bonds in third spaces means that such talk is more likely to be problematic and thus civility is an important criteria. Having outlined some key aspects of third place and how this varies in third space, we now turn to why we hypothesise that third space might provide an important avenue for political talk.

Third Space and Political Polarisation

The potential for political polarization to occur online is widely recognized. There was initial hope that the internet would decrease polarization by broadening people’s range of social connections (McKenna & Bargh, 2000) and by lowering the sense of social presence which, in turn, might reduce the perceived risk of political disagreement (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; Stromer-Galley, 2003). However, the more widely held view is that online political debate becomes polarised. Often associated with Sunstein’s (2001) *Daily Me*, the fear is that the ability to determine what political media one consumes will allow ‘narrowcasting’ – people will choose to avoid content that they disagree with and associate with people who hold similar views to their own. For Van Alstyne and Brynjolfsson (1997: 3–4), this is because: “If IT provides a lubricant that allows for the satisfaction of preferences against the friction of geography”, such as communicating with like-minded people, the internet might lead to apparently “local heterogeneity” to “give way to virtual homogeneity as communities coalesce across geographic boundaries.” Research has found political polarization in a wide range of online spaces including political blogs (Gilbert et al. 2009: 2; Adamic and Glance, 2005; Hargittai, Gallo, and Kane, 2007; Lawrence et al. 2010), Twitter (Smith et al. 2014; Himelboim et al., 2013; Lorentzen, 2014; Conover *et al.*, 2011) and discussion forums (Wilhelm 2000; Davis, 1999; Hill and Hughes, 1998). Surveys, meanwhile, identify that there is a more general trend of talking politics with like-minded people (Mutz, 2006).

We hypothesise that polarization is less likely to occur in third spaces and that debates will be crosscutting (H3). First, to polarize requires that people have relatively fixed political identities that they can coalesce around. The stronger a person’s political partisanship, the more likely it is that their discussion network will be homogenous

(Brundidge 2011). It seems more likely that people will be more political partisan in politically defined spaces. People must actively choose to visit political forums, and it follows that these people are likely to be politically minded and have stronger political views. In third spaces, the shared tie may be geographical or interest-based, but crucially the tie is *not* political and this makes cross-cutting political talk more likely – be it by choice or inadvertently. Recent empirical analyses of online polarization has found that while online political discussion is positively associated with a heterogenous political discussion network that contradicts Sunstein’s ‘Daily Me’, it remains relatively weak and “people are not exactly lining up to expose themselves to political difference online...” (Brundidge 2011: 695). Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009: 50) also analyse whether online debate leads people to exposed to political disagreement, finding that this is most likely where talk emerges incidentally and is not the main focus of the forum and when people are less politically informed: “Internet users who are not sufficiently engaged in politics to selfselect into explicitly political online chat rooms or message boards inadvertently encounter political views online in hobby and interest groups in particular.”

Third Space and the Avoidance of Politics

Research shows that people avoid talking about politics; talk only in ‘safe’ places or on ‘safe’ subjects where they perceive others to hold similar views (Eliasoph, 1998; Conover and Searing 2005, 277; Mutz and Martin, 2001; Mutz 2006; Noelle-Neumann 1984); and block or unfriend people with whom they disagree – particularly weak ties (John and Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). Avoidance undermines deliberation. Even if the discursive environment is heterogenous “a person’s political *network*” may not be: “hearing the other side takes place at the level of discussants within a network rather than within some larger, aggregate social context” (Mutz 2006: 12). Building on a classic study conducted nearly 50 years ago, it is hypothesised that political talk in third spaces is harder to avoid. First, political talk often “comes up unexpectedly as a sideline or marginal topic in casual conversation” (Lazarsfeld et al., 1968: 153).

While third spaces are a *form* of virtual community with a group of super-participants that may have relatively strong ties and sense of community identity, it is not that easy for them to just turn off political talk (Bello and Rolfe, 2014: 135). Furthermore, the discussion in third spaces has a fluidity that facilitates a wide range of weak ties too – and these are particularly important to overcoming polarization and the avoidance of politics (Mutz (2006: 54). Put simply, we believe “fragmentation theory makes little sense once we move beyond the politically oriented communicative landscape” (Author B and 2011: 29). Thus we hypothesise that people will engage in political disagreements (H1) across party lines (H3) and on sensitive political topics (H4).

Third Space and Discursive Inequality

Online political debates (and online political participation in general) are often found to have highly active minorities that dominate activity (Davis 2005; Author 2006, 2007). This is problematic for some theories of deliberation, which typically argue that deliberation either requires broadly equal participation, or at least the opportunity to deliberate equally (Dahlberg, 2001, 2004). However, recent empirical studies of online political debate – from across both formal party spaces and everyday spaces such as help communities – have found that these “super-participants” often perform a positive discursive role, facilitating debates, setting the tone, and encouraging new

users (Albrecht 2006; Author B and Author A 2014; Kies 2010). Building on both Oldenburg's positive analysis of the role of 'regulars' in third places, and the more positive analyses of the impact of frequent posters in online political debate, it is hypothesised that "regulars" or "super-participants" have a positive impact on debate (H5).

Third Space, Deliberative Breakdown and Incivility

Online political talk is often found to lack deliberative qualities (Wilhelm 2000; Davis 1999, 2005), though findings do vary – in part due to different definitions of what is considered civil (Papacharissi 2004) and deliberative (Author A 2012a). There is also significant unease about incivility – flaming, trolling, and attempting to shout down or silence opposing views – particularly in anonymous online spaces (e.g. Santana 2014). Uncivil content may be exacerbated online because it is positively associated with network virality: "incivility has become an even greater *bête noire* online than on television" (Mutz 2015: 171, 174). While some criticize civility as a new form of censorship (Limbaugh 2011), others argue that 'uncivil' media, such as polarised and often confrontational US radio and television talk shows, can have significant negative democratic effects (Bennett 2011; Mutz 2015).

We hypothesize that political talk in third spaces will be of a high deliberative quality across several criteria. In part, this is because of the weaker potential for polarization and avoidance as discussed above (H3, H4). However, we also contend that community norms, the 'regulars', moderation, and other design choices can help to encourage more deliberative and civil talk (H5). First, we hypothesise that political talk in third spaces will be rational and critical (H1): people will use evidence to support claims rather than make assertions and that people will engage in political disagreements. Second, we hypothesise (H2) that debates will be civil, with limited flaming, trolling and curbing.

Methodology

This study uses a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of online debates about the 2016 Australian Federal Election in an online discussion forum/community devoted to parenting. We chose to focus on an online parenting community build around a threaded discussion forum because such spaces often feature the social and environmental characteristics of a third space - and our initial analysis indicated the forum was a third space. We focused on a political event (rather than a more diffuse account of politics) for several reasons. First, we have previously captured political talk using broad definitions of politics either reading all of the messages (Author B and Author A 2014) or using keywords to identify the political debate (Authors B, C and A 2016). The focus on a formal political issue is, thus, original. A national election was chosen because it is a key moment in democratic/civic life. As noted previously, there have been a surprisingly limited number of studies of everyday online political talk about elections as most scholarship focuses on how the political elite communicates online. Second, while we are in favour of broadening out definitions of the political, critics are concerned that results might be more a logic of the definition than a reflection of actual political talk. This approach avoids this criticism. We selected the specific case because we wanted a strong national and it has a strong Australian identity. Second, we initially chose a parenting forum because we wanted to compare the data with existing research on UK parenting forums.

The method adopted for this study was a manual content analysis. Data was collected from the forum using a web-scraper, and stored offline in a database. To identify threads that focused on the election we manually searched the thread list as there were issues with the website’s search function. These threads were all in a political sub-forum (news and current affairs). Combined, this may weaken some of the key normative benefits of third spaces such as the proposition that political talk is harder to avoid in third spaces. In practice, we discovered that there was limited talk about the election outside of this section –perhaps because moderators moved other threads into one big election thread to maintain continuity. One single thread accounted for 95% of all the posts across the 3 election threads. This moderation policy is likely to further impact debate.

The principal method for analysing the nature of the debate was content analysis. We divided the content analysis framework into four separate sections, and they were coded in four phases to increase reliability. The coding manuals were tested and refined, and coders were trained to enhance reliability. Inter-coder reliability testing was conducted using the Re-Cal platform and were found to be reliable:

	Krippendorff’s Alpha	Agreement (%)
Election Codes	.72	88.9
Topic of Debate	.85*	99.3
Nature of Debate	.87*	95.6

Table 1: Reliability Test Results (N=71) (*Includes codes with 100% agreement recorded as 1.0 for perfect reliability)

Phase 1: Nature of Debate

First, we will present our method for analysing the nature of debate. Our initial step was to analyse the discursivity of debate: messages were coded as a *standalone comment* when they did not reply to another message; coded as a *Seed* message if they were at the start of a thread; a *reply* when messages replied to another message; or a *reciprocated exchange* when there was a comment, reply and a further reply. Second, we analysed whether a message was a *rational claim* or an *assertion*: was a claim supported with some kind of reason or evidence or was it just a claim? For example, “Labor’s negative gearing policy is crazy because it will harm the middle class” would be coded as a rational claim whereas “Labor’s negative gearing policy is crazy” would be coded as an assertion. Finally, we coded for *critical reflection*: a rationalised claim that directly challenges or refutes another claim in the thread or beyond. This is indicative of crosscutting political talk. The final step was to analyse for negative behaviours. We coded for *degrading* comments that attempted to lower the character, quality, esteem or rank of another participants or the participant’s claims e.g. ‘you’re an idiot’; ‘you don’t know what you’re talking about’; ‘it is stupid to argue that climate change is real’. *Curbing* messages were attempts to suppress or restrict another participant’s claim, argument, position, opinion, or statements in general. This includes statements like ‘you don’t belong in this forum’, ‘shut up’, and ‘you need to stop posting’. Finally, *flaming* was coded in messages where people used foul language or were aggressive. We also coded for one further positive behaviour, when users *acknowledged* other users with words of encouragement, compliments, thanking and statements of sympathy such as ‘you’re amazing’, ‘great work’, and ‘thanks for your support’.

Alongside these codes, we also recorded whether a poster was a super-poster (more than 2,000 posts); the total number of posts made in the three threads by each participant; and whether the post was made by a moderator or community staff (which was clearly identified) to add granularity to the analysis and to allow us to assess the impact of super-participation and the regulars (Author B and Author A, 2014).

Phase 2: Topic of Comments

Our third phase focused on what we had identified as key topics in the election, to see the extent to which they have been picked up and commented on within the forum. This is not an exhaustive list, though having read all of the comments we believe it did cover a significant amount of all of the political talk. This was not a dominant code (in other words, if people talked about the environment and infrastructure in the same comment it would be coded twice):

- Environment: climate change, agriculture, animals;
- Asylum and Immigration: turnbacks, offshore detention, rights of immigrants, integration of immigrants
- Indigenous Affairs: land rights, indigenous education, health, equality, racism towards indigenous Australians
- Science and technology: research, science, space, tech industry
- Education: schools, universities, childcare/pre-school
- Economy: budget, deficit, growth, health of economy, who people trust to run economy, unemployment, jobs
- Housing and Real Estate: rental prices, negative gearing, house costs, house building, apartment block development
- Infrastructure: roads, public transport, airports, NBN and internet cabling
- Health and welfare: Medicare, Centrelink, benefits, hospitals, doctors

Phase 3: Political Views and Polarisation

This set of codes analysed whether each individual participant in the thread expressed either a direct political affiliation (e.g. 'I support the Greens') or a general political affiliation (e.g. 'I vote for left-leaning parties'). We used this to analyse the spread of political affiliations of users; the total numbers of comments of people from the left and right (by marking every comment from someone said they voted Labor or left with their view); and whether people engaged in crosscutting political talk between left and right. Occasionally, people made who they voted for explicit without specifying a party or stating a left/right affiliation (e.g. "I believe in higher taxation and a strong welfare state and more funding for schools" would be coded as left-leaning; statements such as "I believe in marriage equality" were not coded as this can apply to left or right). As this proved reliable, we included these as well as left or right. Where people stated which party they supported or voted for, this was coded as their political view throughout. If people stated they voted in a certain direction, we checked their other posts to see if there were specific statements of support for a party. Similarly, where no political affiliation was given in the first comment of a poster, we checked their other comments to see if a political affiliation was given. Where people contradicted themselves (very rare), this would be coded as unclear. Our categories were: Left, Labor Party, Liberal, National, Green, Independent Right, Independent Left, Independent unspecified (states supports independents with no other clarifying information), Left, Right (including statements such as I support the

Coalition), undecided (e.g. I am still thinking, I am not sure) and unclear (where no view was given, or it was unclear/contradictory). To analyse polarisation, we linked people's political views to the discursive structure of the debate to see whether people identifying as left or right (and so on) were engaging in debate with each other, and how.

Political Affiliation and Polarisation

There were 71 users participating in the three election threads of the forum. A user is considered a participant if they post at least once. For each of these users we further identified which parties or ideology they identified with. Table 1 shows that 28 participants self-identified as left, Labor or Green, with only 13 users identifying as a conservative voter. A further 29 users were either unclear or undecided about their political alignment. This indicates that this third space has the *potential* for crosscutting political talk, though participants appear to lean to the left.

Table 1: Political Affiliation

Political Identification	No. of posts	No. of users	No. of Super-posters	No. of comments by Super-posters
Left	194	20	8	62
Right	11	3	2	8
Labour	83	3	3	79
Liberal	131	5	2	14
National	0	0	0	0
Green	88	5	3	55
Independent unspecified	6	4	0	0
Undecided	13	3	1	11
Unclear	66	26	14	30
Total	594	71	33	259

This imbalance is compounded because people from left commented more frequently. On the right, there was one Liberal-affiliated user that posted the majority of comments. We also analysed the 'super-posters' (users who had posted more than 2000 comments on the forum) and discovered that while there were only 3 super-posters who were self-declared Labor voters, they were extremely active within the thread. These three Labor supporters combined were responsible for 79 of the comments, highlighting the dominant role their voice played within the election debates. Right leaning and Liberal associated 'super-posters' were infrequent posters, by comparison, with only 22 comments combined. Super-posters in total contributed 31% of the total number of posts, which slightly less than overall average. Focusing on the top 10 posters within the three threads, they had made 65% of the comments. Further discrete analysis is required of their posting behaviour. However, given the overall positive findings, in which they were key participants, they can be said to have had a positive impact on debate (H5 – Graham and Wright 2014)

While there were some inequalities in participation, there is still a significant amount of crosscutting political talk (40%) in which someone who self identifies as from the left engages with someone identifying as from the right (figure 1). So while most posts came from people with a left-leaning affiliation, posters from the right actively

engaged in these debates (and avoiding talking amongst themselves completely – see figure 1).

The crosscutting political talk is visualised in figure 2 using a social network analysis map created with NodeXL. In the map, users are clustered by affiliation, so Labor voters are in G2 and Liberal voters are in G5 and there is a significant amount of debate (as visualised by the lines) between these groups. Indeed, the dominant profile is for people to engage across different political affiliations, with relatively limited debate amongst explicitly likeminded (e.g. green-green, Labor-Labor) people. This supports hypothesis 3.

Figure 1: Cross-cutting political talk

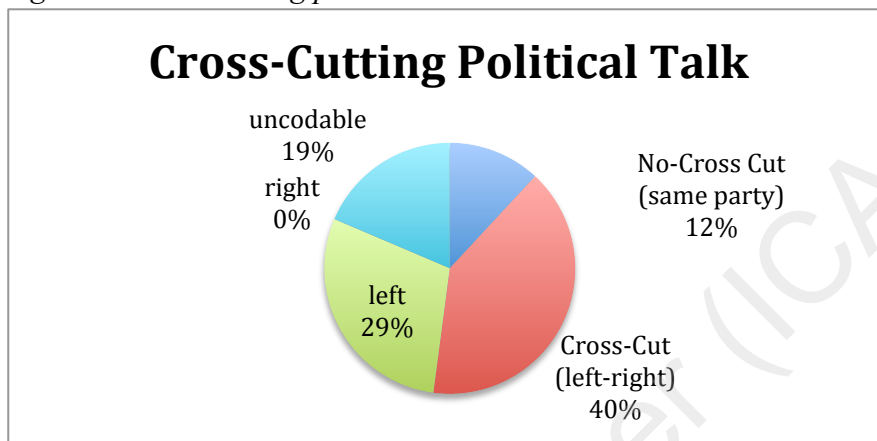
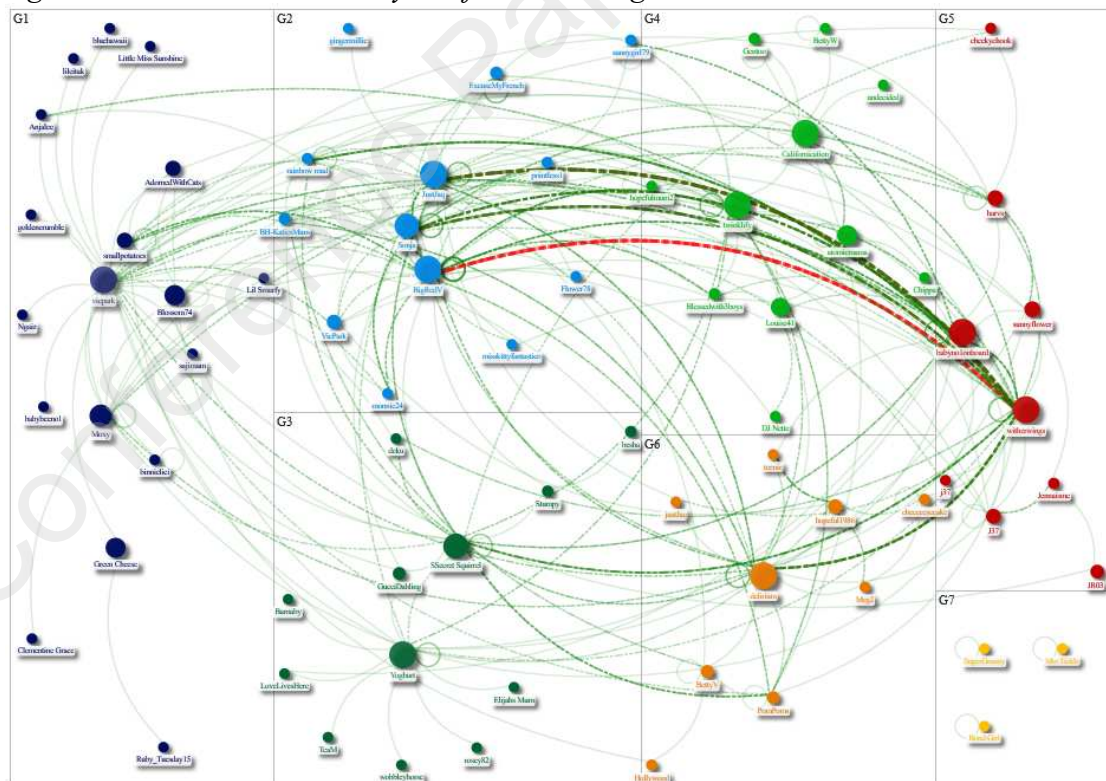


Figure 2: Social Network Analysis of Crosscutting Political Talk



Note: G1=left; G2=Labor; G3=unclear; G4=undecided; G5=Liberal G6=Green G7=unclear

While the analysis shows that people are engaging with people who hold a different perspective, this does not necessarily mean that they actually disagree with each other. It might be that people avoid disagreement and debates become more homophilous than is apparent in the network structure. To analyse this, we coded for whether people agreed, disagreed, or whether there was neither (e.g. where no opinion/argument given – neutral statements). As would be expected, most posts were neutral (43%), but where an opinion was expressed it was more likely to disagree with another poster (33%) than to agree (24% - see figure 3). The next step was to determine whether these agreements and disagreements were occurring amongst people with similar or dissimilar views. As shown in figure 4, the majority of disagreement occurred when talk was crosscutting and so, overall, the debates had a significant amount of critical, discursive debate (H1).

Figure 3: Level of Agreement

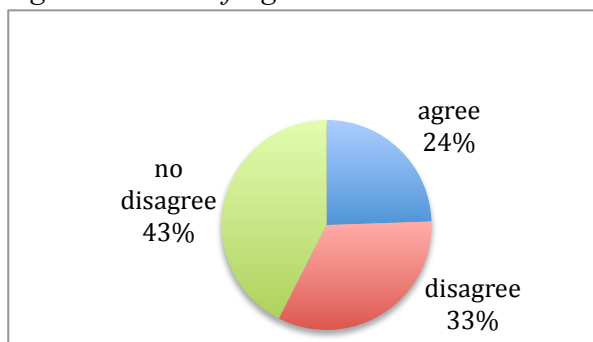
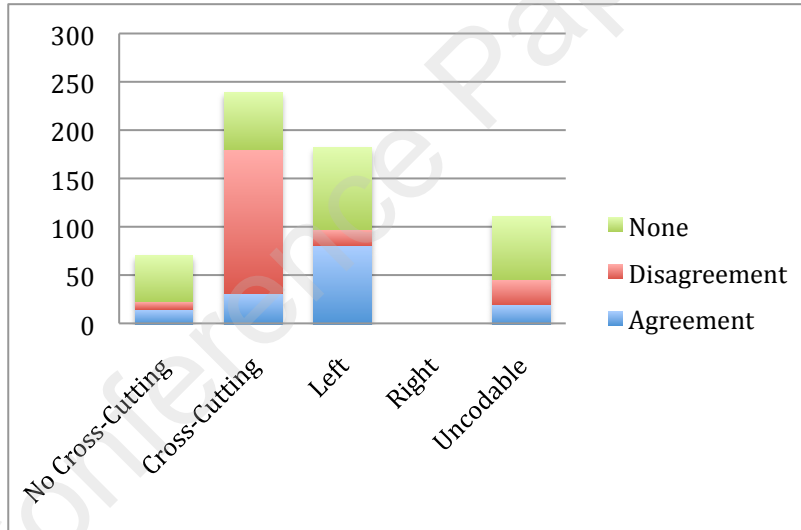


Figure 4: Impact of Crosscutting Talk on Levels of Agreement



Nature of Debate

Within the election threads we found that 81% of posts were ‘reciprocated exchanges’. A ‘reciprocated exchange’ differs from a simple ‘reply’ (18% of posts) and is used to identify the third or more response within a debate. This illustrates that conversations in the election threads are not one-way (as further highlighted by the fact that only 1% of the posts were “standalone comments”), but rather that they were interactive with users engaging in a reciprocal discussion (H1).

In the context of the significant amount of crosscutting political talk with arguing and debating, we might expect there to be deliberative breakdown. However, we

identified a reasonably high level of supportive and positive acknowledgements between users on the thread and very low levels of degrading, curbing, and flaming (H2 – see Figure 2). When we consider the topics of debates were often quite difficult and orientated around sensitive issues – for example around asylum seekers – and that the exchanges were highly interactive, the results suggest these debates were deliberative.

Figure 5: The Nature of Debate

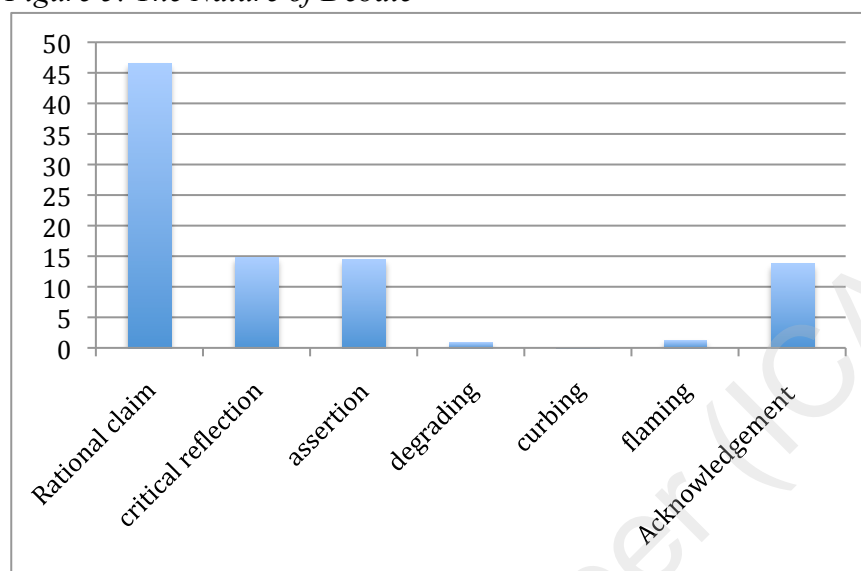


Figure 5 indicates that the quality of debate is good, with 47% of comments coded as a “rational claim” compared to only 15% of comments coded as “assertions” (15%). A further 15% were “critical reflections” (15%), showing that relatively few users provided counter claims that were specifically in response to another user’s argument (though, as noted previously, most posts are neutral and so this figure is somewhat distorted). This broadly supports hypothesis 1.

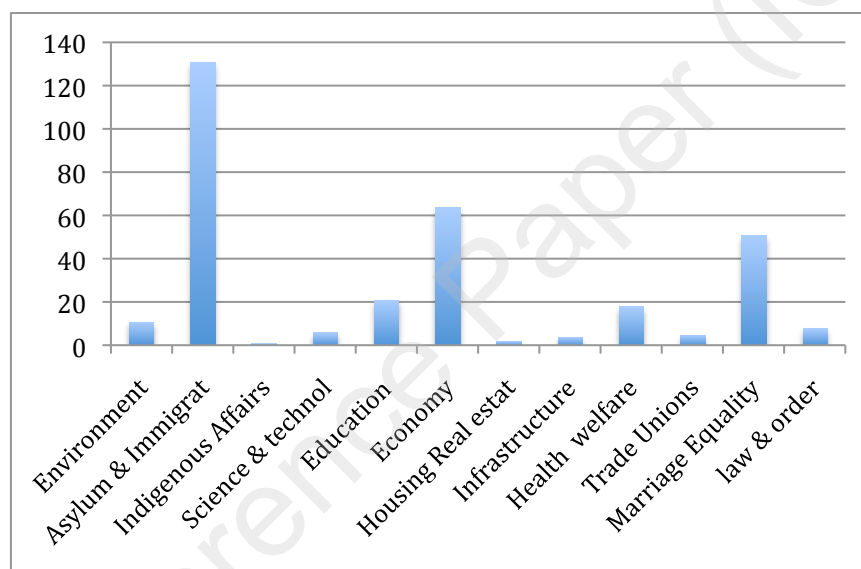
A closer analysis into the content of the debates suggests users find ways to relate to other users who hold differing political alignments and attempt to find common ground with each other. Users illustrated a constructive and considerate type of engagement where they reflected and expanded upon another user’s claim rather than blatantly disagreeing with it. This is reflected in a specific debate in which a few left-aligned users discuss with a couple of liberal voters their similar views on social issues such as marriage equality and asylum seeker rights. A few users expressed surprise at their shared views and further attempted to understand where their differences emerged.

This display of genuine and civil deliberative political discourse emphasises the value of the forum as a third space. It highlights how everyday political talk online helps individuals to construct their own civic identity while also enables them to contextualise their own views amongst others in their community. The practice of finding common ground with each other also helps develop a sense of empathy and mindfulness with differing views, further strengthening the bonds between members of the community and provoking some of the users to consider alternative perspectives.

The 'Too Difficult' Box?

There were three key themes that were prominent in the election threads. First, there was a large amount of discussion around asylum seekers and immigration (22% of all posts), much of which was about a revulsion for Pauline Hanson and the far right. Second, discussions about the economy were prominent (11% of all posts) with users comparing the two major parties' differing approaches to economic policy. Third, discussion around marriage equality was quite common (9% of all posts). There was ubiquitous support for marriage equality with lots of frustration over the proposed plebiscite and Turnbull; many users voiced their desire for the bill to be passed and to stop wasting time and taxpayers' money. It was noticeable that the environment and real estate were barely mentioned (2% and 0.3% of all posts respectively). There was also a notable lack of discussion surrounding indigenous affairs (only one post mentioned indigenous issues and that was in relation to the first indigenous woman to be elected into the House of Representatives).

Figure 6: Topic of Debate



The analysis of topics indicates that people did not avoid difficult or sensitive topics (Mutz 2006; Eliasoph 1998) and there was critical debate on issues such as immigration and asylum – supporting hypothesis four. Discussion of marriage equality, however, was homogenous with many Liberal voters critical of the parties' own policy for a plebiscite. This is not particularly surprising as the policy was the result of a deal between the left and the right of the Liberal Party when Malcolm Turnbull took power and national surveys indicate it is highly unpopular.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that third spaces provide an important arena for everyday political debate. The debates analysed here were of a high quality overall, and did not feature many of the issues identified with online deliberation. Indeed, the results support each of the 5 five hypotheses. Overall, the political talk was critical in tone, with people engaging in deep debates rather than standalone comments and generally

using evidence to support claims (H1). Similarly, there was very limited evidence of negative discursive behaviours (H2). These findings are rather different to many studies of political debates in political forums (e.g. Davis 1999, 2005; Wilhelm 2000). This appeared, in part, to be because of a supportive environment with a shared interest and many people knew each other and had trust – key features of third spaces (Author A 2012b). The moderators did not play a significant role within the thread, though they did move other threads to these to centralise the talk. Although participants were predominantly from the left, crosscutting political talk was relatively common (H3) and often involved disagreement – supporting survey research by Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009) and Brundidge (2010). Participants with right-leaning views were acknowledged by left-leaning people with phrases like "we still love you" or "we shall agree to disagree". This created a relatively easy platform for more right-winged users to voice their opinions. The topic of debate was dominated by sensitive political issues (H4) such as asylum and marriage equality, which makes the tone of the debate all the more impressive – suggesting that people did not avoid political talk (Eliasoph 1998; Mutz 2006). Within these different characteristics, super-participants seemed to play an important role in helping to set the tone and structure (H5), though further research is necessary to unpack their actual impact (Graham and Wright 2014).

While these results suggest some promise for political talk, there are limitations. First, this is an individual case study, using a small sample, and during an atypical election period. Second, it would add greater weight and validity to the findings if they were compared with debates on the same topic and time in a political discussion forum. Third, the case study was a parenting forum. It seems likely based on anecdotal evidence that the vast majority of posters are women and gender is likely to at least partially help to explain the positive findings presented here. More research is, thus, sorely needed.

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